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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 149 (2014) 825 – 830

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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LUMEN 2014

# Qualitative Methods for Determining Students' Satisfaction with Teaching Quality

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## Abstract

This research is focused on the possibility to increase the quality of teaching by determining the motivating factors that lead to improved teaching and to learn the factors that lead to a decrease in the level of student involvement in teaching and scientific activities. The results based on observation and logical assumptions provide information about students' vision on the ideal type of teacher and teaching style. Most of the students appreciate as good personality traits: teachers' openness to dialogue, human nature, personal experience in the area of study and teachers' explanatory skills in delivering scientific information.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of LUMEN 2014.

**Keywords:** Motivating factors; personality traits; student's empowerment; teaching quality; teaching strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Teacher quality is a very important educational factor as it can increase academic achievement and can improve teaching activities. Recent research has shown that teacher quality can influence, in a positive or negative manner, students' learning ability. This study strives to find solutions to teachers' and students' problems concerning better teaching and learning methods. For a higher quality in education it is necessary to devise a new strategy which enhances teaching quality, as well as methods for developing better teachers. The interviewed students consider that a better teacher is the one able to motivate them to learn and to apply. Many studies reveal that "motivation affects what learners pay attention to and how effectively they process it" (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Pugh & Bergin, 2006). In the opinion of Ormrod (2010) "motivated learners often make a concerted effort to truly understand classroom material—to learn it meaningfully—and consider how they might use it in their own lives". The transfer of learning in nowadays life is important, as real applications require the connection of a lot of knowledge, and for students to

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properly “apply what they have learned in an educational or training setting” (Wlodkowski, 2007). The transfer of learning in nowadays life is important because „people apply what they have learned in an educational or training setting” (Wlodkowski, 2007). In the opinion of Goldhaber and Walch, (2014) most teachers “tend to be related to the courses they are teaching, which is consistent with the idea that strong content knowledge is one of the attributes of teacher success”. The goal of this study is to determine students’ overall satisfaction with: the teaching activity, the cooperation between teachers and students in class, the involvement in practical activities and in the evaluation process. Moreover, this research is focused on the possibility to increase the quality of teaching by determining the motivating factors that lead to better teaching and learning. Also, it reviews the factors which lead to a decrease in the level of student involvement in teaching and scientific activities.

## 2. Materials and methods

For the purposes of this research, we selected 204 third year students of the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca. We only took into consideration the opinion of third year students because they have a vast experience in educational activities. Considering the above, the type of sampling applied was “convenience sampling”. The research works conducted by Price (2013) and Saumure & Given (2008) describe that a “convenience sample is a sample drawn without any underlying probability-based selection method” and it “can be defined as a sample in which research participants are selected based on their ease of availability”; at the same time it can be used like a qualitative method based on the investigative procedures considered by the researcher. The study has at core the following methods of collecting information: traditional method (by using logical responses given by students in the implementation of focus group technique), rational method (using questionnaires with objective items), mystical way (by using responses given by students based on irrational, mystical, augmentation and moral portraits of famous teachers), intuition way (by using first impressions that students have formed about the teacher) and empirical way (based on observation of reality and analysis of students’ degree of involvement in course and seminar activities). The focus group technique is a method that uses the creative potential of participants and their ability to produce ideas in groups. The application of this technique gives rise to a focused discussion, which should provide comprehensive qualitative information (Krueger & Casey, 2005). An important feature of this method is that participants may alter partially or even totally change their opinions by the end of the discussion (Miftode, 2003). The structure of the focus groups was homogeneous in terms of the participants’ profile (third year students). They worked for two hours, in groups of 12 to 15 participants, in a cumulative manner, since the study aimed to obtain a wider range of information. In order to determine student satisfaction with the teaching activity, a satisfaction questionnaire was applied, with opinion questions and factual questions. This questionnaire was employed as working instrument. The questionnaire consists of 10 open items for determining students’ opinion and 20 items addressing four aspects of satisfaction: the communication between teachers and students (5 items), accessibility of the content delivered (5 items), students’ general satisfaction with teaching activity (5 items), students’ involvement in the teaching and assessment process (5 items). The students were asked to reveal how they felt about their relationship with teachers in general, with no reference to a specific course or teacher’s name. In order to shed light on the intensity of opinion, an ordinal scale type was applied. The scale was marked from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## 3. Results and discussions

The results of the study identify students’ degree of satisfaction with the educational activities offered by the university and aspects that students consider to be important for their development. The results can help teachers and students to diversify the teaching or learning strategy in order to improve their relationship and to correct some shortcomings pointed out by students.

### 3.1. Teachers’ and students’ role in educational activities

Teacher’s and students’ role in educational activities was determined through the traditional method (using the logical responses given by students in the implementation of the focus group technique). Since the theme explored is

a topic of general interest for the educational system, the focus – group technique was considered appropriate as qualitative method, because it can provide information about the role of the teacher and the student in the teaching process. As such, the eight focus groups generated sets of concrete data related to the subject under discussion. These data sets include a wide range of information focused on two main areas of interest, namely: obtaining qualitative-exploratory information and getting emotional details about teacher's role or students' role in the didactic activity.

a. Obtaining emotogenic details

Students pointed out the emotional impact that teachers had on them in six of the eight focus groups formed. In most cases, students described the emotional impact as positive, meaning that teachers managed to build an affective-motivational environment, favourable to learning. In his study Knoel (2012) refers to a similar situation, where a favourable perception on students' relationship with their teachers led to increased academic performance (Knoel, 2012). However, some discussions revealed situations where the teacher's attitude led to the deterioration of an efficient communication relationship with the students. This deterioration was caused by the fact that "teachers cannot understand their students." Under this umbrella concept gather several student complaints such as: excessive requirements of the curriculum, too loaded study schedule, differences in mentality between teachers and students, too vast scientific content, too little leisure time etc. The body language of the participants revealed interest and involvement in discussions in the majority of cases. The data obtained via the focus group technique provided details about the surveyed situations. Also, we obtained data about emotional aspects, which cannot be highlighted in a quantitative research.

b. Obtaining qualitative and exploratory information

The group interactions generated synergistic effects which led to a higher quality of the exploratory information about teachers' and students' role in the teaching process. In this case, the following points were considered to be of interest for the research: the opinions, suggestions and reactions of the persons selected for the group interview. Thus, the opinions were different among the focus groups organized, which were almost identical. This proved students' ability to influence each other in expressing their ideas.

Among the basic ideas issued on the topic we mention: the desire for an improved educational offer through a more attractive approach of the courses; implementation of software solutions; application, as much as possible, of practical aspects. Students expressed their opinion concerning a greater involvement at individual or team level in the learning activity (by studying real situations applicable in practice).

Also, they discussed about developing their ability to think creatively, innovatively so they can be competitive on the job market. They mentioned that "the student has more value if he is creative and less value if he is only a tool in the teacher's hand". Students want to increase the number of applied activities, "We want to put into practice the theoretical knowledge acquired" "Employers ask us about experience, what we can do, not just what we know." Students expressed their desire to carry out internships in different firms or companies (partners with the university).

They also expressed their gratitude for the free access to information. In the library there is enough material in hardcopy or electronic format. This aspect also satisfied them from a financial point of view, as on the university premises there is free access to Internet, they can access the specialist electronic information from different fields of study (journals, electronic books).

Disturbance effects were observed in two of the eight focus groups organized. The disturbance effects were: group dynamics and group polarization effects, when the group was dominated by a vocal member who prevented the other participants from expressing their ideas. These effects have distorted the real messages, therefore the ideas (exploratory qualitative information) put forward by these two teams were not considered for the purposes of this survey.

### 3.2. *Opportunities to improve the quality of education*

The possibility of improving the educational act was determined based on: rational methods using questionnaires with objective items and empirical methods using the creative answers given by students. The empirical method was based on research of the reality described by students and the analysis of students' involvement in courses and seminars. Since only a qualitative study was performed through the focus group technique, we wanted to complete it with quantitative data. To achieve this objective the responses to the questionnaire given by students were

summarised. Their answers highlighted aspects such as: communication, accessibility of the contents delivered, general satisfaction, students' involvement in teaching and assessment. For all four aspects students were requested to express free opinions, suggestions and proposals to remedy undesirable situations.

#### a. Communication between teachers and students

According to the opinions issued by students, the communication between them and their teachers can be improved by using efficient methods and appropriate educational tools. It is necessary to adapt the teaching strategy to students' communication needs. Students emphasized that a better strategy would lead to a better understanding of the scientific content and that they would be able to learn more easily. Teachers' approaches in explaining scientific content to students, as well as the educational tools and methods (which ensure the teacher-student communication) are still based heavily on the traditional system. In this case students are passive actors; they are the target of the information. In the traditional system of taught, teachers do not expect any response or feedback from students, or a response is rarely requested. The transfer of information to students through university lectures fails to address students' needs and profile any longer, because it restricts the dynamic of communication. Students' goals are to be involved in teaching activities, which would captivate them due to the creativity and innovation of the teaching methods employed, accompanied by relevant examples and a good technological base. In their research works, Nokes and Belenky (2011) "describe how can incorporate aspects of competence motivation—specifically and students' achievement goals" (Nokes & Belenky, 2011). A significant percentage of 50.49% (103) of the respondents believe that the most important goal is the relationship that is built between the teacher and students. The teacher-student relationship establishes itself as a process of mutual understanding and continuous interaction. This relationship can be built during courses and extracurricular activities. The remaining 7.35% of the interviewed students took into account other factors that can contribute to the development of teacher-student communication, such as: the importance of the subject for students, the level of teacher's involvement in teaching, mutual respect between teacher and students etc. Two communication-related questions (if the teacher should encourage communication during courses, and the shared use of efficient methods of communication by students and teachers) are rated 5 (Strongly Agree) by 89.71% of the students and 4 (Agree) by the remaining of 10.29%. It is interesting that no student rated it lower. The result reveals the importance of efficient communication in education. According to the research of Lee (2007), the relationship between teachers and students is a condition for successful education. Also 80.39% of students consider that the lack of interaction, lack of feedback, and difference in mentality between teachers and students are barriers in communication and also in the training of future specialists. A faulty communication has an internal causality, i.e. teacher-student incompatibility; in this case the teacher has probably chosen the wrong line of work or vocation. This situation will lead to the stagnation or even regression of students in that area of specialization. According to the most creative answers given by students about ideal communication, it was concluded that it can be achieved only through a high level of interest manifested by teachers and students in their work. Accordingly, a strong teacher-student communication relationship is a necessary condition for the efficiency of the academic activity.

#### b. Accessibility of the academic content delivered

As regards the accessibility of the contents, students consider that motivation is very important for learning. As motivating factors, 42.64% of students believe that the use of appropriate modern technology and teaching methods contribute significantly to increasing students' involvement in the activity. Another factor, highlighted by 37.74% of the students, was the explanatory skills in delivering the academic content, accompanied by the teacher's pedagogical talent. Also 63.23% of students agree that only by being involved directly in the teaching and assessment process they would understand better the scientific content and the accessibility of information would increase. Yun (2009) said that is very important to involve students in the teaching and assessment process - "getting them involved in making sense of the course content through discussion, small group problem-solving, creating questions, even checking each other's' notes" (Yun, 2009).

#### c. Students' overall satisfaction with the teaching activity

Most students (85.29%) were satisfied with teachers' professional training. Also, 60.29% (123) were satisfied with the manner in which teachers encourage students' professional activity. But there is a significant percentage (74.50%) of the interviewed students who declared that they disagreed with the way in which the Romanian education system prepares them for integration into the labour market and more importantly how they will be integrated in the future society. They are dissatisfied with the traditional teaching methods and the lack of practical

experience that will constitute a problem at the time of employment. Also, elements such as the curriculum, program of study, specialized knowledge are not in full compliance with the requirements of the labour force market. Teachers are not sufficiently involved in adjusting syllabuses to correspond with employers' wishes. A similar point of view is encountered in the study conducted by Garon (2011) in America, which shows that "If only we teachers would stop being lazy and complacent, students would catch up to their peers abroad, graduate from high school and college, and dominate the marketplace" (Garon, 2011). A percentage of 65.68% of students are satisfied with the activities carried out by teachers, especially if their teachers assume the role of group coordinators and not the role of "tamer". Also, students appreciate the teachers who see them as "capable people" and are interested in students' needs and vision on scientific subjects.

#### d. Students' involvement in the teaching and assessment process

Some of the students (35.29%) are dissatisfied with the manner in which their teachers teach or assess. Thus, they showed that entire courses are mere monologues because teachers read books or scientific content on PowerPoint presentations and they are bored. Inadequate situations were highlighted by 42.64% of respondents. In these situations, teachers dictate the content and students take notes. In all the above cases students are not involved in the teaching activities and as a result they get bored and find other occupations such as mobile games, communicating on Facebook, sending text messages etc. Moreover 50.98% of students want an increase in the degree of their involvement in teaching and even in the assessment process. In his book on assessment Stiggins (2005) describes how an objective assessment, that reflects students' performance, can be achieved. Students believe they can be more empowered and that the "Student-centred teaching" approach could be implemented, so that it does not remain only a desideratum.

### 3.3. *Myths about teachers*

In her article Stansbury (2011) wants to help others people understand some myths about teachers, which are merely misconceptions, such as "Those who can't do, teach". In Stansbury's (2011) opinion, there will always be myths about teachers. The present research aims to discover other myths about teachers. All the myths presented in this research were derived from the opinions expressed by students. The oral answers were based on the following components: irrational, mystical, augmentation and moral portraits of famous teachers. Among the myths discussed and analyzed by students, the following stood out:

"A is only for the teacher" or "The teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing" - these myths are related to "demanding teachers" who believe that they are the only ones knowledgeable on the scientific content and also who disregard students' ability to learn or to keep pace with scientific novelties.

"The teacher never makes mistakes" - this myth shows us teacher's perfection as opposed to students' imperfections, who sometimes make mistakes. It also shows that the teacher knows everything and more importantly, he is always right in everything that he says or does.

"The teacher cannot be contradicted" this myth comes to emphasize the previous myth, by showing that the teacher does not accept students' opinions; he has monopoly over the information, the teaching and assessment process, this is to say that he is all-knowing.

"Everything the teacher does is for the students' benefit" or "Teacher decides what is right or wrong" - these phrases show us a justification for the decisions, facts or actions taken by the teacher, although these may sometimes be wrong.

"The teacher knows everything, this should not be questioned" or "The teacher can cope with any situation, he is always a good example to follow" these myths make the teacher look like a demigod, but it has nothing in common with reality, because the teacher is only human. In this case we should admit that the teacher cannot handle any situation correctly.

### 3.4. *Portrait of the perfect teacher – in students' vision*

The portrait of the perfect teacher was described using the intuition method or by putting together first impressions that students made about their teachers and analyzing the qualities they would like to find in their teachers. The results based on observation and logical assumptions provided information about students' vision on

the ideal type of teacher and teaching style. Thus a ratio of 79.41% respondents appreciated as "Good Personality Traits": teachers' openness to dialogue, human nature, personal experience in the area of study and the explanatory skills in delivering scientific information. It was noted that teachers' age can influence the quality of teaching and learning. A ratio of 43.63% of respondents did not have enough confidence in young teachers' knowledge (less than 30 years), according to the rationale that they did not have enough experience yet. Another part of the students (18.62%) do not prefer older teachers; although old teachers have experience, students motivation was that "old age imposes authority" and they cannot inquire for further information because, in their opinion, old teachers are authoritarians. Students have pointed out the following characteristics for the ideal teacher: communicative, creative, empathetic, passionate about science, funny, open to new ideas, interested in students problems, flexibility in thinking; he/she is not boring, imposes respect, is fair, smiles, interrelates with the group, is punctual, is an example of behaviour and moral conduct, explains the scientific contents, loves his job, has general knowledge, remembers students names, avoids monotony.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study emphasizes the "positive factors" that contribute to improving the educational process and implicitly to increasing student satisfaction with the teaching activity. The positive factors are: high level of teachers professional training, application of efficient teaching strategies, ways of conducting courses involving students in teaching, implementation of practical activities, the benevolent attitude of teachers and patience to explain, efficient communication, elevated speech, respect for students, the teacher should surprise students with something new and interesting to captivate them, fair assessment and friendly attitude of the teacher.

At the opposite pole, student highlighted the "negative factors" that contribute to lower student satisfaction with the teaching activity. Some of these factors include: inadequate material basis and insufficient practical activities for certain disciplines. Other negative factors are related to teachers' attitudes, such as: arrogance, superiority, nervousness, lack of adequate teacher-student communication, boredom, indifference towards the discipline or students, subjectivity in evaluation, revenge, threatens targeted at students, lack of interest in teaching, failure to comply with the type of examination. Improving student satisfaction and the entire educational process can be achieved by eliminating the negative factors or correcting them, which depends only on us, teachers.

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